Problems in the Deployment of Learning Networks In Small Organizations

Dean E. Shankle, Jr., Ph.D.
Gate City Community Development Corporation
34 Franklin Street
Nashua, NH, USA
d.shankle@snhu.edu

Jeremy P. Shankle, MS-CED
Aretao
121 Mont Vernon Road
Milford, NH, USA
jshankle@aretao.com

Abstract

This paper argues that when attempting to develop learning networks for lifelong learning, it is vital to overcome the inevitable organizational resistance to change. This resistance takes many forms, but in each case it stifles the ability to move forward. Furthermore, although there are also technological and pedagogical perspectives to consider, without a proper assessment of an organization's needs, a realistic assessment of its capacity and "buy-in" from stakeholders, it is impossible to meet the minimum requirements necessary to properly develop and implement a learning network solution. The authors base their assessment on over ten years working with organizations that develop learning systems and networks using a variety of technologies, including open source.

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Organizational Change
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Organizational Capacity
Leadership Buy-in
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1. Background

The concepts of "learning networks" and "learning organizations" are becoming well known, understood, and productively implemented. Building effective learning networks involves the inclusion of "pedagogical, organisational and technological perspectives [1]". Although each of these perspectives has its own set of issues, this paper focuses on one: the role of the organization itself in successful implementation. We will address the issues of the organization as they relate to building learning networks in small organizations.

Although many organizational leaders today see that new forms of technology and pedagogy can help them build learning networks within their organizations, they are frequently unable to capitalize on this opportunity. They find themselves, unwittingly, resistant to the very thing which they would like to see: emergence.

"Emergence occurs when an interacting system of actors and resources self-organizes to form more intelligent, more adaptive, higher-level behaviour. This is reflected in the organisation that arises, which puts constraints on the social interactions of the actors and resources [2]." While the reasons are complex and many, in our experience with small organizations we have observed that the problem boils down to three primary issues: the importance of needs assessments; failure to capitalize on available capacity; and lack of long-term buy-in from organizational leadership.

Over the last ten years, we have worked with governments, non-governmental organizations and private businesses in both the United States of America (USA) and Ukraine, helping them to build systems to allow them to communicate more effectively. Over the last few years, this has developed into the more systematic methods associated with building learning organizations and learning networks. For example, Dean was involved with the *Learning Design* book study done at moodle.org and was the facilitator for the chapter "Designing Learning Networks for Lifelong Learners" [3]. Jeremy started a nonprofit for training and consulted with groups in the USA and Ukraine on the development of communications and organizational learning. This paper is based on our research in these areas, and on practical experience we gained working with organizations from the planning phase, through design, implementation and evaluation.

2. Needs Assessments

The first mistake organizations make is not conducting adequate needs assessment before adding new technology and new processes to their training toolboxes. The purpose of assessment is to determine what resources -- personnel, materials, equipment, time, funding -- must be devoted to the process to make it work. Leadership should determine the intervention that will be needed as the learning network is developed [4]. Of course, the needs assessments themselves take time and money that might seem better invested in project design and implementation. However, a shortcut around needs assessment is a dangerous and costly mistake.

Partly this is the result of the desire of small organizations to show immediate return on investment of any resources. This is probably less true in the academic world, where scientific methods are built into the fabric of projects. However, in our experience, small organizations, whether governments, NGO's, or private, are likely to be wary of costs that do not appear to lead to actual project outcomes, especially when the organizations already have strains on their resources.

Strains, in fact, often lead organizations to look to technology to expand capacity; learning networks offer an apparently ready fix for training needs necessary to stay state of the art, for

example. In other words, an organization that wants to increase participation in life-long learning through the use of training technologies is less likely to think it necessary to spend valuable resources on discovering whether or not a problem exists or its extent. However, a well-designed needs assessment will go beyond narrow parameters and preconceptions to frame the entire learning network design.

A pitfall for projects that have not conducted proper needs assessments is "mission creep", in which the project ceases to focus only on what is needed to reach the goal. Instead, other tasks and functions are tacked on, and "bells and whistles" are added, not because they are needed, but rather because they are possible. In our experience, this is quite prevalent and obscures the original focus for the learning network.

Many organizations succumb to the thinking that if simple technology is good, then a more complicated one is better. This seems to be true even if it is clear that the simpler technology will fulfill the organization's short and long term needs. Organizational leaders think the organizational culture will be more impressed with and prefer the "pop and sizzle' of extras and so will support the introduction of the learning system more readily.

"Bells and whistles" mission creep happens because, while simple forums, wikis, or other technologies, may fulfill project requirements, it is easier for many people to believe that a learning system is working well if it has cursors flying around the screen, or small cartoons explaining concepts. This is especially true when the decision makers are not the end users. The need to impress overcomes the organization's needs and the project is likely to go over budget or fail completely.

3. Capacity

Failures due to 'pop and sizzle' thinking occur not only because real needs are ignored, but also because organizational capacity can be stretched through the overuse of unnecessary technology. This then reinforces the belief - one of the most prevalent forms of resistance - found in many organizations that expanding use of technology will sap vital resources from their core mission. This does not need to be true; the smallest organization, with the least capacity, can greatly expand training offerings with a minimum investment in appropriate technology.

It is useful to first consider an organization's strengths and weaknesses in relationship to its ability to implement a learning network. With that information, feasible solutions can be devised. Failure to properly implement a program is often more a case of focusing on the perceived lack of capacity, rather than determining what is possible with the capacity that is available.

In small organizations, two main perceptions exist: first, bandwidth is a problem; and second, complicated, many faceted learning networks are necessary to effect positive organizational change.

A lack of affordable, fast Internet connections is a leading problem in the successful implementation of technology for training. We encountered this problem in places as divergent as western Ukraine and the northeastern United States. Solutions should be explored that function with low bandwidth because they exist and are highly functional. However, because of bandwidth problems, learning networks are sometimes overlooked due to an overly simplified needs assessment, or an "all or nothing" approach to technology implementation.

Organizations too often are lead to believe that only a comprehensive solution will meet their learning needs. They are told it is necessary to implement a full-service web portal, to have synchronous training methods, such as video-conferencing, and to employ their own in-house IT staff, before attempting to implement any type of

learning network. Unfortunately, organizations fail to capitalize on possible solutions with low powered computers, few computers, and even limited, or no, Internet connectivity.

Furthermore, such misled organizations fail to capitalize their available capacity. Some examples of technologies we have implemented in small computer labs - even without Internet connectivity - include solutions based on forums, wikis, and open source learning management systems (eg., Moodle and LAMS). These solutions, based on open source software, require only a web server running on one computer in a network. Of course, as organizations grow, their capacities and needs grow with them. And their solutions will expand, but they can start where they are.

Unfortunately, free and low-cost options are often not pursued because of the 'bells and whistles' attitude of leaders and fears many novice users have concerning technology. If it looks simple, there is the perception that it must not do much. Or, conversely, if it is cheap and easy, it must not be capable of doing the job necessary. These misconceptions demonstrate the importance of needs assessments we discussed earlier, which allow organizations to avoid unnecessary discrepancies between perceived possibility and reality.

4. Buy-In

"Buy-in" refers to the amount of the commitment that key leaders and stakeholders have in seeing that a learning network is developed and implemented. This is a crucial because even if the needs assessment shows that there is significant amount of benefit that technological solutions can provide, and there is organizational capacity to capitalize on the technology, without proper organizational buy-in, projects will be dead before implementation has begun.

In fact, this "death" can occur at any time: from the beginning of the project needs assessment, all the way until months, or even years, after a learning network has been launched. We have seen a project stopped in its tracks because of a single person. The organization had one manager interested in the benefits of using his existing infrastructure to build more Internet centered learning, but he left shortly after starting the needs assessment. We have also seen organizations succeed with their projects, only to lose the accumulated benefits as the attention of leadership drifted.

Failure of organizational leaders to buy-in leads to a waste of resources and prevents the discovery of further applications; the growth of the network flounders. We found that even simple solutions, such as a web forum for encouraging organizational knowledge management, added much more than we had imagined when we began a project. However, this process of discovery and growth cannot happen without buy-in from the organization's leaders and staff; all stakeholders must take ownership.

An example of the power of buy-in is an organization we assisted on design and implementation of an intranet. Everyone was initially excited about the possibilities of improving internal connections and organizational knowledge management. The intranet was showing great promise and was used extensively at first. However, slowly and steadily use began to decline. When we were asked to determine the cause, we discovered that the president of the organization was the member of the team that posted and visited the intranet forums the least. This gave the impression to the rest of the organization that this was not really an important mode of communication.

Once the reason for the drop was pointed out to him, he quickly adjusted his habits and increased his involvement. Once it became evident that the president was using the network, not only passively by

reading but also by posting significant information in intranet forums and resource depositories, the rest of the staff became reinvested in the process.

However, it is also true that even when the leaders of an organization have personal buy-in, if front-line staff cannot be convinced to learn new technologies and processes, the project still will not succeed. This is often the failure of organizational leadership to provide preparation time and support to staff. Also, often it is simply a lack of willingness by staff to learn new methods. Learning networks only work well if the entire organization is involved.

5. Summary

Although technological and pedagogical considerations are important in the development of learning networks, without proper organizational support it is unlikely a system will be effective. As we have described in this paper, lack of proper needs assessment, lack of appropriately determined and utilized capacity, and lack of stakeholder buy-in hamper proper development of a learning network.

One of the items on a table of requirements in a study of learning networks reads as follows: "Learners should be able to select their personal learning activities from a variety of learning opportunities, which are described and offered by various organisations. Technology/information relevant to these opportunities should be provided and the marketplace should offer varied possibilities (e.g. resources created/ exchange by means of partnerships, coordination and cooperation between all kind of individuals and groups, like enterprises and governmental organisations, communities, clubs) [5]."

We have found that without proper organizational commitment - in the form of proper needs assessments, development of appropriate capacity and buy-in from stakeholders - this requirement will not be met.

References

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